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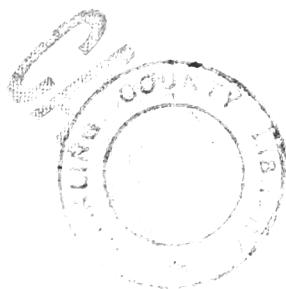
Helsinki

HELSINKI

SELECTED POEMS OF

Pentti Saarikoski

TRANSLATED BY ANSELM HOLLO



Rapp & Carroll London

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HELSINKI
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INTRODUCTION

‘As I left the poetry reading and started walking along Oxford Street, looking at the shop windows, the people, the red double-decker buses, the cubist taxicabs, and at everything, I suddenly felt I had had enough of “poetry”: anywhere, everywhere in the world, in all the languages, there was poetry poetry poetry—yet it was so invisible, it did not survive the width of one street, one noise-filled canyon; it was so feeble, so timid, so blind. I remembered how, a long time ago, at school, I sat and wrote poems during the German lessons, certain that *i I I* should become, whatever, and looked out at the trees and church spires in St John’s Park outside the school and tried to see that God whom I would have to vanquish before I could become whatever it was I wanted to become; and now I was walking in Oxford Street, knowing that God was dead, and that all this poetry was about the death of God.’

Pentti Saarikoski wrote these reflections four or five years ago after a stay in London on his way back from Dublin, where he had spent several months working on his Finnish translation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (which appeared in 1964). In the light of his own poems and other writings it becomes obvious that the remarks can not be interpreted as a plea for the abolition of poetry, or as an admission of defeat: he has in fact published three collections since then. The ‘failure’ he accuses ‘poetry’ of (and he uses the English word in his Finnish text) is not so much ivory-towerism, or modernistic arrogance towards the hypothetical reader/listener, as its floundering in the shallows of self-importance, in the confused, self-inflicted dichotomy of ‘private’ and

‘public’ that is so obvious in the work of a great number of poets, both European and American, who are published and regarded as ‘what is/going on’ . . . many of them younger than Saarikoski himself (he was born in 1937). Despite his Marxist convictions, Saarikoski does not share the facile optimism and populism of a Yevtushenko, or the often equally facile tendency to audience-wooing in the manner of Vachel Lindsay (or Dylan Thomas, for that matter) of a Voznesensky; and despite his awareness of the need for communication, and his own penchant for public activity, he does not short-circuit his energies by falling back on some mode of easy familiarity that might just divert the attention of an audience for a moment from the latest Top Twenty constellation in more popular areas of life. He simply does not have a private and a public voice: like Tadeusz Różewicz of Poland, whom he might well be compared to in a number of fundamental attitudes, he seems to have decided that if it is possible to speak at all, in poems or otherwise, it is equally possible, not to say imperative, to speak about *everything* that has a bearing on one’s life without dividing that life and one’s manner of speaking about it into compartments furnished with the literary, ‘cultural’, aesthetic notions of a ruined and decaying society. It is exactly this that caused bewilderment and antagonism in those critics, of the political Left as well as of the Right, who felt themselves to be representatives of the general public in terms of taste and tradition when Saarikoski’s first books appeared in Finland in the late fifties. Ironically, the greatest stir was over a book of translations of the very few and extremely fragmentary works of Hipponax, the pre-Homeric Greek poet—a collection of a quality, style and scholarship equal to Guy Davenport’s recent *Carmina Archilochi* (California University Press, 1964). Hipponax’s frankness and funkiness proved too much for those members of Finland’s cultural élite who had been brought up on a Teutonic plaster-cast version of Hellas; some of whom even went as far as to accuse Saarikoski of having *invented* the glorious old ‘Horse Prince’.

From its beginnings— influenced by reading of both the Imagists and the Greek Anthology; through the second stage, the word-mobiles of ‘What Is/Going On?'; to the recent, more relaxed and, in terms of syntactical structure, more explicit manner of poems such as ‘Helsinki’, and the dream-like post-Surrealism

of his last book *Song/by Song/Away*, a sequence of love poems to a 'dark lady'—Saarikoski's poetry has never proposed any soothing 'coherences', blueprints for groups or movements (though he has attracted his share of imitators), or closed systems of personal projection. His position as the most-talked-about and best-known poet of his generation in Finland, as well as his growing reputation abroad (so far, translations have appeared in Swedish, German, French, Russian and Spanish) are perhaps due to the intellectual and imaginative power to change, to avoid all repetitiveness, to operate on a constantly demanding level, while at the same time creating an unmistakable 'mind-sound' which gives the reader a pretty well-definable idea of the mind he is attending to and lets him, as it were, 'in' on its workings—provided that the poems are not approached with 19th century 'literary' prejudices. It is not for me to curtail the effectiveness of these poems by giving a thumbnail sketch of that mind: from my own experience of it I should only like to say that it seems to be one of the few I know that are truly of our time, of these fifties, sixties, we hope, seventies—when we shall have to reinstate the human being and its needs in the world and in the world's thinking and writing above all metaphysical and idealistic cadavers and pseudo-problems; or, otherwise, end in the greatest, final pseudo-event of them all. What Saarikoski says to me is that we are all involved in the politics of the human being—and questions of 'commitment', i.e. self-conscious and therefore always superficial involvement, become irrelevant at his level of discourse and may be clearly seen as obstructions to the intelligent and useful practice of the art of speech and vision.

ANSELM HOLLO

The Madman's Horse

I bought a horse from a madman.
He had drawn it himself
and it was a regular horse
but for the eyes: they were in its nostrils.
Still, that was
intentional: that people would see
how mad he was, and buy more drawings.
I bought it. I thought of the horse,
thought of it standing, among the pine-trees
in the evening, when the sun's ears
are streaming with blood.

1918

crash
and the door flew
off its hinges
my hat too

too bad sir
you'll have to wait
until the autumn
too bad the misses
have to leave
their needlework
and the ladies
their Singer machines too bad
we can't have the banquet and ball
impossible
in this wind

such stupid doors sir
doors that don't last
the summer out
however
soon we won't need a door

they have taken the horses
sir there they stand
at the edge of the wood
and now they have riders
and the riders have rifles

well i am leaving
said the chambermaid
but i calmed her down
only the gentlefolk
i told her
only the gentlefolk get killed
like you sir

better hurry
now you have no peace

to end this war with
an eternal autumn
has been planted
for you
right here

leaves gone birds flown
the tree so light to carry
everything ready
for those who will come
to visit the past

mygod
what are we going to do now
said the lady
shut up no use bawling
said the master
and he was right

three bearded fellows
stood on the threshold
no funny business they said
that took care of the lady
but the whole era
was hung by its feet
from the chandelier
and shot thru the navel

.

winter now
the air is cold
the ground is hard
the rabbit goes hungry
in the wood
no food
soon snow
many feet high
and what shall poor bunny do then?
don't you think we should fix that door
at last
comrade sir?

The Guest

Every day now, since my wife told me to cease from
writing poems
I've been treating myself to these American prunes;
and she has come to see me, whose breasts
are 'so moist and tender, you can eat them like candy'.

Une Vie

But when Grandpa, the miner, came back from the States
spouting tales wild and woolly, his teeth
slanting backwards, his pockets empty
and said Now darling, how about building that house
Grandma picked up her scissors and struck him through
the heart

Life was given to man
for him to consider
in which position
he wants to be dead:

Grey skies float by,
star-meadows hang

and the earth
comes into your mouth
like bread.

What is/going on?

this started, This started

this started two years before the wars
in a village now it belongs to the Soviet Union
of the war I remember only the fires
they were lovely
no such fires these days
I run to the window when fire-engines howl
all my childhood I traveled
I became a communist
walked in the cemetery
studying the angels'
private parts
they don't have them these days
sell a curuli struma Nonius sedet
burnt books in Alexandria
impersonated a flower a stone built a church
wrote poems to myself the chair rocked up and down
no such high-backed chairs these days
there is however high poetry I'm expecting a check
 What is a mistake, the wrong turn, the right turn, no
 the road is ± 2
I live in times to come
read the newspapers of tomorrow
support Khrushchev carry the stone owl from room to room
looking for a place to put it, This started

KTO KOVO KTO KOVO

high poetry, the sun sets, the sun rises
The Sun burns

the big guns are hollow arms without hands
the rain falls into them

the bird that zooms down tail first
and cries *KTO KOVO KTO KOVO*
is The Weapon
the forest splits apart is a road
is Khrushchev
no road

And what is Europe
a frog jumps its nose caught under a stone

and:

a church full of women
the bull bellows a hundred bulls
the Negro sheds his skin
Republican Democrat join in a final embrace
the crucified one turns in the wind

and the world is lost if it does not turn also,
America steering Europe by her hind legs
and Castro a Statue of Liberty

and:

the ideological content: shadows of deeds embracing
the crucified one makes a jingling sound
like a city expanding
a pretty castle built on a child

120 miles from Leningrad

Helsinki is where I live.

Helsinki is the capital of Finland.

It lies by the sea 120 miles to the west from Leningrad.

Helsinki is an expanding city, and the rents are high.

We sit here surrounded by our forests, backs turned to the giant
and stare at his image in a well's eye. He wears a dark suit,
white shirt, silver-grey tie. In his country everything is
quite different, there people walk on or without their heads.

We sit here in the midst of our very own forests,
but far away in the West there is a land where huge eyes float
by the shore, and they can see us here.

Helsinki is in the process of reconstruction, according to the
plans made by Mr Alvar Aalto.

points on the circumference

the last letter slowly unfolding
a wreath a life-saver moving towards it
a wheel-shaped cloud caught on a steeple

fourteen is half of seven the numbers
are points on the circumference
gluttons tied to the spinning table

are changes that do not occur are flowers
exploding sky-high and the Sun burns
the heart but not the speech from the heart

and the first letter is a bull
charging the one that is slowly unfolding
is the Sun is the radiant tip of cock

is a milky way for the Sun's seed
a spinning system the bush is burning
is happy Pythagoras traveling on

L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle

I lived in a ruin the house they called The Lion
a woman sitting on the floor
her breasts were watching me

Zone

A woman a place of birds
those lips down below like willow leaves
L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle

I was writing a righteous book of revelation
a godless tragedy
I had died
a Christ pared down to the state of a fish
and a flashing eye

of pure practical intelligence

First seek ye the kingdom of pure
practical intelligence

shreds of posters and headlines
shards of gramophone records feathers

lights shining arcs
the well-lit borders

when the rush-hour comes
and the hour of the pile-up
and the sounds of breaking steel-plate and people
are heard in the dark

when the journey is broken, no one is on the right road

voice in the head

voice in the head
 all afternoon
 like molten plastic the sky
 that vertical mouth
 the voice a gate I am passing through
 the tree that shelters me
 the smell is in the leaves
 like silver-needles so quick
 that I should go
 small diving
 elephants in my blood
 the smell
 goes to your head
 like incense
 and the church is built out of flesh
 on the rock named
 night and day blue soil the roots
 that I should go
 and die
 dig my elbows into the ground
 and the earth

communication

sunshine

a sunny day like a spacious hotel and

the star a mine adrift in the sea

an historical pageant

demonstration

blood in their shoes

communication

the streetcar went

far

away from the city

the maze of veins

you lose your way in

and the windows

you get stuck in

as you attempt to escape

An automobile lying on its back in the water

Pope and Czar

I have been listening
to my heart for a long time
the white screen the way
that discus-thrower moves
the tombs of Tarquinia

Pope and Czar

Metternich and Guizot

The French Radicals the German police

Which people lives the way this dead one knew

UNTO ETERNAL PEACE

the black automobile
the lion and no other beast

I have been driving

through the white screen for a long time to my heart

cold globules pass through the heart

cold globules pass through the heart

I want to get out from inside you

listen

the trees

scratching against one another

light and warmth in the café

or the certainty

of a number or letter seen

from a bus window every day

now I stand by the wall

alone

and the disaster cannot be averted

not an inch

jeder, der sich uns entgegenstellt, wird vernichtet

wir weichen hier keinen Schritt zurück

let's make coffee

the smoke seems purer at night
the wind more audible

let's make coffee

that rock jutting out of the ground like a fist
now think about Finland
I have been thinking about
just about everything and now it is late
I'm tired

sand on the bird's wing

another country

I love you
as one loves another country
the rocks
and the bridge
or a quiet evening
with its smell of books
I walk towards you
in this world
under the atmospheres
passing between
the two lights
with my thought which is carved
carved out of you

the flag

the boys were playing ice hockey
stiff as a window the flag stood out in the wind
the delivery van backed out of the garage
the woman pulled back a curtain to see was it cold outside
in the distance there was a thin layer of snow on the fields
in the paper there was a picture of two Cabinet Members
on their way to a meeting

Quid est, Catulle?

Quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?
sella in curuli struma Nonius sedet,
per consulatum peierat Vatinius:
quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?

people coming out of church
conversing about the sermon
sniffing at the autumn air
something in the papers about forces of popular opinion
and values which are unto our nation

what is
holding you back, Catullus?
why don't you go and die?
the stalks of the potato-plants
are rotting fast this year
only October now
this evening away
A boy comes out of the wood,
crossbow on his shoulder

and goes on and has been going on

in his famous History of the Revolution Trotsky recounts
how Lenin
when Lenin wore spectacles and a wig
when it was raining
in St Petersburg
Mother Russia was giving birth
to a child
that was to become

when they've stopped serving drinks
the customers have been chased away
the chairs stacked up on the tables
and the cashier is counting the take
when you look at it all from outside
and business is as usual
and goes on and has been going on

that automobile looks worth a fortune and I am sheer
darkness like an angel
outflying the speed of its own light

thought of a poem

the parliament had been dissolved
there would be pictures in the morning papers
with President Kekkonen
 looking concerned
 and Finland shown on the map
 as a darker spot
 like a broken eye
listening to the radio I thought of
 one summer morning
 walking through a park
 very early in the day on my way home
 having stayed up all night
 looked at the flowering shrubs the sun came up
 thought of a poem
 little green guns were guarding that sunrise
 no one in the street
 a poem about Berlin
saying these verbs will be withdrawn from circulation
 to be used exclusively by right-wing radicals
their trenches filling with water

what is really
 going on?
the air was warm that morning
and it was like standing in a big room looking out the window

boredom the greatest problem

an open market economy and the right to say
whatever one happens to say, the Western way
I am talking, talking this long evening away

through the open window you can hear people talking
the curtain flutters
next to that birchtree the yellow bus-stop sign
there they stand
waiting

now you can get these shelters from Switzerland
for about the same money as any good car
if they would only combine the shelter with a car
you wouldn't have to stay in the same place
all the time

boredom the greatest problem
in any shelter
how could I make her happy
get a new suit
and a topcoat pure wool oh yes pure wool

how high do you think the real
estate prices are going to get
yes that one he held on to his summer-house
for all it was worth
the pinetrees are dying so close to the city

there was a woman in the bus whose mouth was like a buttonhole

the new suburbs surrounded by woods

the new suburbs surrounded by woods
beautiful pawmarks
of capitalism

the schools are closing today
soon it will be Christmas
they're selling trees for that purpose
in the market
the Vicar is masticating the Message
there's not enough silence these days
except in the churches

I lose myself in these corridors
never reaching the heart

when you have lost it all, everything to be said
has been said

I put my ear against the wall
and listen to the slow
erosion of concrete
everybody is building shelters and vaults

and what lies in between

the conditions for life to begin
the conditions for life to cease
and what lies in between

one has to be able to think of it all
get it all into focus
turn fear into knowledge

those who lose their heads
when the changes are slower than predicted
those whose lives seem to pass in vain

in Nuremberg one night I suddenly knew
no one had been executed
all the verdicts were still to be carried out

radicalism and reaction
two sides of one and the same
such as buying and selling

went to the border of two great empires
idols stood leaning against the rocks
skirts and trinkets hung from the branches

not even in these times can gods be overthrown
by simple onslaught
the walls must be fortified first
that they may crumble later

those whose eye sees the near and the far
who make haste
with deliberation and courage
such as their day is their power

September is followed by May

the weather o it is fine
her eyes are golden
the wind blows promising spring for us all

under the eyelids
there is a cool place
the wind blows through the golden retinae

the apples are growing big
the children are throwing apples through the tree
September is followed by May for the second time this year

London Poem

On what is now my news
Went to Finland for a month, it didn't work, it is
a little better here
you don't have to be
anybody or to conform to anything
to anybody's anything
you can own nothing, you don't have to strive
for virtue
ownership being the one and only virtue
In Finland it didn't work, I was afraid
they would all realise that I have no desire
and no ability to acquire
that virtue
Here, it is a little better
I can always point to the Far North and say
there, there it lies
my virtue, there
I have an apartment a wife and children
friends and opinions
to influence public opinion
there, I have I have
pointing to the north I say, I have
and sit here reading
the Economist on 'how to expand'
throw orange peels on the floor, sun shines
a dusty windowpane and almost three o'clock
in the disintegrating world
all of us watching it go, not really caring
I don't really care I light a Woodbine
a woodbine is a woodbine
and how is it with me here, am I happy
what part of me, my fingers, toes
my hair or teeth or that which has remained nameless
since God was born of a virgin
lost, cut off, cast in the mold of steeples
Yes I am working
serenely all day, not waiting
but as I sense the endless, flat city all around me

I become restless
I am waiting
for the flowering of this city and all cities
Take a walk
underground, between trains
see a woman combing her hair
looking the way she does she won't change much
A thought
How could I ever
really say
anything
at all

Making the Sun Run

1

I'm in a fix.
Surrounded by these so
socially useful
Animals . . .
No matter what
I say or how.
I'm in worse than a fix.

2

Light in a hostel window.
Someone moves in the room.
The houses' outlines dissolve in the fog.
Not much to see.
Says 82-year-old Asberg the engineer,
Still, so much to do! and now
my eyes begin to fail. He observes
the stars,
draws weather-charts.

3

Fall mists like an old man's gestures
drift.
I walked the path that followed the curve of your smile.
Talked to men who died long ago.
This
was my work.

4

Worst,
the nights. His self-pity
dozing in daytime, in the ceremonial
folds of megalomania and plans
wakes up:
the images block out sleep.
They swell to choke him

in the narrow room.
He would like to shatter himself, but instinct
 decayed into vanity, holds him back
and his nostalgia-feelers vibrate
 away, from what feeble touchings.
He fears
the little girl who makes the sun run
 at her bidding.

5

Sand tinkling, glass—or a revolution?
Sparse landscape, and
no talk.
Of the good times, the happy events
and comings-together
 little is held
 in the mind.

not one theory that isn't simply a film, covering
something else,
so much to do; what agents, of what era to come
are spreading this gas of apathy,
so much to be done,
yet the fallout of resignation
destroys the thousands of flowers.

I have learnt this city,
have my ways thru it, always in the street,
always gone, somewhere else,
in worlds that do not exist any more, or others
that haven't come into being,
no one speaks to me now,
on the ancient mountains, the shepherds
singing dancing

nothing is superfluous,
nothing is necessary,
what I arrived at, was this: not the time now
for writing poems, talking, not the time
to go to friends, drink wine, read poems,
not the time now,

I carry a bomb in my briefcase, I destroy Helsinki,
I resign, forget the past, the beautiful buildings,
old streets;
if the people walking those streets do not think new thoughts
they (the streets) are worthless and should be destroyed.

As I can't put myself into words,
being Oudeis, not skillful, not widely-travelled,
I am who was here, right here, all the time, this place:
alone, stood in the fog,
died quietly,
shouted his shout, first to sell hats, then coffee,
killed with his long-bow,
met others, killed,
it is one and the same case history,
see, I walk down the road.

Climbed the stairs to the Tenho Bar
(‘well, going to school doesn't seem to make them
any wiser’, the doorman said),
it made the evening pass, I felt like dying

of Happiness and Helsinki; those who taught me
didn't learn much.

I do remember: often I sat in the room next door
and watched them, the others,
turning, dancing around
what was my place, I was born there, it was mine,
home-yard and window and flowers,
always in flower, there, below
the window.

ANSELM HOLLO

3 May 1967





